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review

INSIDER

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INTERVIEW

**ROBERT
ZEMECKIS**

director of
*Death
Becomes
Her*

*Goldie Hawn in
Death Becomes Her*

PEOPLE IN CINEMA

INTERVIEW

Hollywood director Robert Zemeckis is officially the most commercially successful film maker in Hollywood. He first rose to prominence with the sleeper hit *Romancing The Stone* and has since ridden high with a succession of blockbusters, including the three *Back To The Future* films and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*.

Zemeckis' latest movie is the unusual, special effects black comedy *Death Becomes Her*, starring Bruce Willis, Goldie Hawn and Meryl Streep, a story about the fountain of youth and its strange consequences on two vain women. Zemeckis also recently executive produced a brilliant, low-budget film noir thriller called *The Public Eye*, starring Joe Pesci as a 1940's paparazzi photographer who becomes unwittingly involved in New York's underworld, and Barbara Hershey, as a beautiful nightclub owner. In Australia to

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promote *Death Becomes Her*, he talked to Paul Fischer about movies, power and Hollywood.

Paul Fischer: Now that you're one of the most commercially successful directors in Hollywood, is it that much easier getting films off the ground?

Robert Zemeckis: It's infinitely easier in the system, because they'll let me make just about anything that I want to make. The hard part is, being out there all by yourself and making all the hard decisions, because I now have all that responsibility. So there's a trade off.

P.F: Do you enjoy working within the Hollywood system?

R.Z: I enjoy the system and I think it's generally good. The only part I don't like, is when your rationality comes into play. It's a strange business - a strange mix of extremely high finance and art, so it creates a lot of nervousness and a lot of strange personalities.

And the system as it was designed was very good, so any time you've got people in their positions who have opinions, who stick by them, who have conviction and have a certain amount of talent, things work out quite well. It's when you've got to deal with people who are insecure and a little bit crazy that things start to unravel.

P.F: How easy is it, in that system, to be far too safe and conventional, as opposed to being an individual film maker?

R.Z: I think the dilemma comes in thinking that you know what is mass marketable; being conceited

enough to think you know that is a sure recipe for failure.

P.F: The studios play it safe, though, by saying that such-and-such won't work because that didn't work.

R.Z: Right, and they say: 'Let Bob Zemeckis make movies, because his movies make a lot of money.' It's an amazing job that these guys have, because how would you like to be responsible for making judgements based on no concrete information ever - multi-million dollar decisions? I think they get a little bit nuts.

P.F: So if you were to make a film that fails, how does that jolt the system?

R.Z: Tom Pollock, the head of Universal said to me: 'It's very easy to predict the failures.'

P.F: How so?

R.Z: Because I think you start to see certain things, like the script not being right, then they don't really attach a particularly good director to it, then it evolves. But they give so much money into it that they can't get out, so they have to make it, and so on.

The successes are the hardest things to see. When a package is presented to the studio from an agency, I think it's easier to predict if that's something that may not work very well.

P.F: With production costs so high, do you think stars are overpaid?

R.Z: It is a lot of money, but you know there's actually a formula that I think they base that on. The bigger stars are probably worth it. For instance, Arnold Schwarzenegger always guarantees a salary in the

opening weekend, as does Michael Douglas and Mel Gibson. But without mentioning any names, it's the million-and-a-half to two million dollar-a-picture stars who don't even bring \$2 million worth of business in, and that I believe is where is the excess is. If you are a proven superstar then God bless you, you should make all this money!

P.F: In your career, you've worked on films which didn't have a lot of star-power, and others, such as *Death Becomes Her*, which is star-studded. Do you have a preference?

R.Z: The star thing has nothing to do with the actor's ability; that's a separate thing. As a film director,



I'm working with immense acting talent. This group of actors [*Death Becomes Her*] is as talented as Michael J. Fox was, before he was a star. In the case of *Death Becomes Her*, it was kind of funny and entertaining to put these stars in these roles and to play against their stardom and against type.

So that was a conscious effort, but as performers, I'd work with them the same as I with a day player.

P.F: But it must be hard, when casting a picture like *Death Becomes Her*, to find the right 'stars' for those roles. I couldn't, for example, imagine Bruce Willis, being your first choice for the role he played.

R.Z: There's not a very long list of actors for that kind of role anyway. When I first read the script, my first choice was Kevin Kline, but we couldn't work out a deal.

P.F: That must be frustrating.

R.Z: Yeah, but that in itself is also a good part of the system, because when it comes down to it, we find out how enthusiastic a person ultimately is about the role.

Only through the deal-making process is everybody shaken down. I'm tested to see how completely hell bent I am on having a person in the film, and the negotiating part also smokes out how passionate the actor is about the part. So Kevin wasn't that keen on the film, and that all worked itself out in the process.

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P.F: Why Hawn and Streep as the two central women?

R.Z: When I read the script, I saw these two actors in these parts; they were always there, and it was the first time ever in my career that they actually ended up in the film.

P.F: The special effects in *Death Becomes Her* are certainly astounding. Are they as complicated as they look?

R.Z: Yes they are, all done with computer graphics.

P.F: You couldn't have made a film like this 10 years ago.

R.Z: Not even one year ago! The technology and programmes were being developed and built as we were shooting, and that's the way this whole computer thing has changed the way films are being made.

P.F: In doing a film that fuses black comedy with special effects, is there a danger that the special effects can take over?

R.Z: Yeah, you've got to watch out for that, and some people think that they do take over. I think they're all in their correct scale. The dilemma, I think, is that the effects were so spectacular and unique, that you can't help but marvel at them.

P.F: What's your best description of *Death Becomes Her*?

R.Z: I think it's a celebration of the Seven Deadly Sins; everybody in the film's got 'em and they're all amoral in some sense. I guess the 'hero' of the movie is Bruce, but he attempts to murder his wife. So while that's totally amoral, in the context it's OK.

P.F: Are you terribly self-critical about your work?

R.Z: Yeah, probably I am; I really should lighten up a little bit.

P.F: Is there a particular type of film that you haven't done yet which you have a hankering to do?

R.Z: The only genre that I haven't tackled yet is suspense/horror, which I'd really like to do - a really scary film. But I don't really have a master-plan.



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